



Diary of a Siege

By Denise Greany

Mary Clay, Newark, 1646

January 6

It is not the noise I hate the most, although cannon make a sound much louder than Sunday bells and you can feel the ground shaking as far as our house, though the fighting is on the other side of the earth wall. My father helped build it, and mother and I pushed barrows of mud. And I am not scared. Mother says God will keep us safe and I believe her, although Margaret Hitchin and her family went to church as often as we and now Margaret and her mother are under the ground. It's not even the solders that fill our town to bursting, for God knows where would we be without them? Every house has at least one. Mother says ours eats more than 10 men, and when will she see payment for his keep? I like him. He makes me laugh and even let me hold his sword once. I thought mother would choke when she saw me slice the air with its shining blade, signed by 'Andrea Ferrera', "the finest sword maker in the world," our soldier said. Mother said she cared not if the sword was made by the King himself, so help her, and that if he placed it in my hand again our soldier could find bed and board with the roundhead scots and to hell with him.

It's none of that. Noise and soldiers and fighting have been with us months, since the last autumn leaves fell and the snow began. No, it's the waiting I hate. I can't play near the river as I used to and there is scarcely any bread to collect from market or coin to pay for it if there were. Waiting. For what? For father to come back from the sconce, the star shaped fort where he defends the town. He is so close and yet we have not seen him this past week, so fierce is the fighting. They say we almost captured the enemy commander and that is why they bombard the town. But I must wait with mother. I must mend our soldier's clothes, and boil for him what food we have and pour him beer from the jug with the bearded, scowling face. I must wait.



January 20th

Today it rained so loudly that I did not hear the rap on the door at first and when I finally ran to open it father was stood in the doorway, soaked near to drowning despite his thick cloak. He wasn't cross a bit, but swung me up so high I thought I might be sick and then held me tight and I didn't mind how the mud on his cloak rubbed off on my skirt and his hat dripped onto my hair. Mother was so pleased at his return she hardly chided him for knocking over the chair when he returned me to the ground. There was no meat for his dinner, but mother lit a fire, the first in many days, and father read to us from a news book that spoke of the bravery of the King and his soldiers. I was awake long into the night, lying close beside mother and feeling the rise and fall of her breathing. Our soldier and father talked for a long time but quietly so that mother and I could not hear them.

January 22nd

I have decided that if the war still continues when I am grown up I shall dress as a man and fight for the King. I have not told mother this. She will not have me skip in the street much less practice with a sword and when I once suggested I would like to take a coach to London and see the King's palace and the great Thames river she made a noise in her throat like a toad and father said 'be silent now', though he sounded more sad than cross. Mother says I must go and live in another household when I am older and learn how to keep a spice cupboard and starch linens and the like, so that I am ready to be married. I told her that if all men are like Thomas Bates or Henry Fuller, who live in our street, I would rather die and she laughed so much she could not get up for near an hour.

January 30th

Our soldier is wounded. There was such a great noise as he threw his armour to the ground that even Alice our neighbour came running, shouting 'God save us' as though he was the enemy himself, riding bold as brass into town. He could scarcely walk in from the door and shouted for mother and bled on the coverlet she keeps on the chair to save the wood from what she calls 'his stink' (though only when he cannot hear her). I ran for the surgeon at the barber shop on Mill lane but he had a man playing fiddle for those waiting their turn for a shave, so I had to shout louder than I ever did in my life and when the men all turned to look at me, my face burned hot and I wanted to cry. He sent his son Raymond, who cut off Richard Brook's leg on Thursday



and he lives still, so I guess he is as able a surgeon as his father, though he is but seventeen and scarcely taller than I.

He drew out a knife but cut only the leg of our soldier's woollen britches, showing a great blackened hole near his knee, scorched like a burn. Our soldier uttered oaths such as I dare not repeat, not even in ink, and screamed so loudly that mother took his hand and gave him the wooden stirring spoon to bite on. Raymond had many strange tools in his bag and he threw them onto the table, sharp knives, flat nosed pliers, a pointed probe and a long saw. With one hand he held the pliers and inserted them closed into the hole, then opened them, holding back the flesh and stretching the skin so tight that the soldier's muffled screams became louder. Mother started to pray, which in truth frightened me more than the blood or the screaming. With his other hand Raymond held the probe, long, thin and silver with a point at the end. He guided the pointed end into the wound. I closed my eyes and began to count to ten. I don't know if it was mother's prayer or the surgeon's practiced hand but when I reached only six and half the sound of metal made me open my eyes in time to catch mother's pewter dish as it was thrust towards me. Swimming in the blood that filled it almost to the top like thick, dark soup, was a round metal bullet the size of a plucked chicken's eye, or so it looked as it swam. Mother shouted at me to take it outside, fearful I suppose of more spilled blood. I was grateful for a great gulp of cold air and tipped it all onto the mud by the pig, who licked greedily at the rich stain on the earth. I rescued the bullet, wiping it on my apron. I told them I lost it but I have it still.

February 3rd

He is 'Thomas' now, our soldier, when mother speaks to him. In truth, before, she scarcely addressed him, handing him our (only) bread or meat or taking from him his filthy clothes, her eyes turned down to the floor as though she could not see him. But after the surgeon left us and mother had washed the blood from the floor and soaked the coverlet, Thomas cried for his wife and begged father to write a letter that she might have news of him. Mother sat by him late into the night with a bowl of water and a cloth to wipe his face. A man came from the garrison to find him and "call him back to his duty," but how will he fight if he cannot walk? He tried today, holding the chair and taking a step only to fall and knock over a tankard of ale. Father says it is a miracle the wound has healed and that he has a leg to walk on at all. Mother says men see miracles where there is only lavender and linen and women's hands to place them where they are needed, but she crossed herself all the same. Thomas is in our prayers



now. I think that means he is in our family, with mother, father and me and Edward of course who we still pray for, though he has been in heaven this last year.

February 4th

Alice Hackett is a witch! I saw her, coming back to the house at first light, carrying a bundle of branches and once, I looked through her window and saw her stirring a great black pot and muttering. She has a shelf of green glass bottles and I am sure I saw something inside one move, though I was so frightened that I closed my eyes and, when I opened them again, the bottle was beside Alice, uncorked and empty. What does she mutter to herself as she works? I asked mother and she said, 'who knows what songs of comfort she sings, poor thing,' because she is a widow, her husband being killed at the Sconce in November when the roundheads first gathered around our town and all the men were pressed to defend us. Father says no wonder he fell so soon, being a man fit more for fields than forts. I asked mother how we know witchcraft is near, yesterday as we washed the shifts, and she made that noise in her throat and told me to scrub more and talk less.

Elizabeth Short, who sells books and pins and lace at the door on the first day of each month, had a pile of stories on her little cart, tied together with string. She said they were new and all the way from London but how they would travel the Great North Road and enter the town in these siege-times I do not know. I blew the dust off the top one and it was about 'Ellen, the witch of Norfolk'. Mother would not buy it, "for lack of coin", she said, but she bought a piece of linen and threads for a penny, hiding the blue silk floss in the pocket under her skirt. I saw the picture, a woman with a pot and a branch and a cat making supper for the devil. Can a picture reach out of a book and work its magic? I think so, for I have dreamed of it this past three nights, a witch with a pot that steams up the windows so you can only hear the cat's purr and the hungry devil's whispered song.

Father says if the devil truly wanted servants on earth, why would he choose old women when there are so many brave men to do his bidding? Father is right about most things, but he did not know as soon as I when little James Henley drowned in the river last Spring or that Eleanor Marsh kissed Edward in the summer before the Roundheads killed him with a bullet like the one in my pocket. He did not know because he is too busy to watch. I am watching. Truth to tell, I have never seen a cat in Alice's house. But, cat or no cat, I am watching Alice Hackett, to keep us safe from the magic in her pot.